CHAPTER FOUR

Mental Self-Care

Did you know that the majority of Autistic people are likely to encounter some mental health condition in their lifetimes? Research suggests that conditions such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and OCD are especially prevalent among Autistic people. These facts underscore how essential it is to take care of your mental health.

Tending to our mental well-being with kindness and compassion is one way of cultivating greater mental health resilience. By understanding and unraveling the complexities of your Autistic mind, you can harness its strengths and brainstorm tactics to navigate its susceptibilities.

Caring for your mental health can encompass a variety of practices, from seeking a supportive therapist to cultivating a healthy relationship with your thoughts and honing your self-advocacy skills. This chapter features an array of self-care activities specifically customized to help you work with your Autistic brain instead of against it. You'll find sections on how to embrace your Autistic identity and interests, advocate for your mental health care, understand your Autistic mindset and well-being, and build mental health resilience. Activities include strategies for integrating your neurodivergent identity, noticing negative narratives and changing the script, finding a neurodivergent-affirming therapist, and more. These ideas are geared toward empowering you to build resilience, foster self-acceptance, and devise effective strategies for managing your mental health.

Tending to your mental health is not a reflection of weakness but a bold act of self-advocacy. By engaging in these self-care practices, you are not only prioritizing your well-being but also fostering your overall mental health as an Autistic person.

Celebrate Your Neurodivergent Identity

Autistic Identity and Interests

Celebrating your neurodivergent identity is built on loving yourself just as you are. Everyone tends to relegate to the shadows parts of themselves that evoke shame, concealing them away, and Autistic people are no different. But celebrating your Autistic identity is a courageous act—an opportunity to unabashedly embrace the essence of who you are.

The process of celebrating your identity will take a unique form for you, as it does for each person. For me, it entails connecting with Autistic culture; embracing identity-first language, declaring proudly, "I am Autistic"; and acknowledging that autism is interwoven into the fabric of my being and is a vital aspect of my identity that I am unashamedly proud of.

You might use some of the same methods I do, or you may choose to express your neurodivergent identity in other ways. You might opt for visible displays, such as wearing clothing or accessories with symbols like the infinity logo, the neuroqueer pride flag, or the sunflower logo, or maybe you'll celebrate your autism through artistic pursuits or personal advocacy.

By celebrating your neurodivergent identity, you are creating a narrative that authentically reflects your lived experience. This isn't a one-time celebration; it is an ongoing, daily journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Embrace your personal strength and own your neurodivergent identity in whatever way feels natural to you.

Address Internalized Ableism

Autistic Identity and Interests

"Ableism" refers to discrimination or devaluation of someone based on their physical, mental, intellectual, or other disability. Internalized ableism is the way that a person with a disability absorbs (even unconsciously) this harmful mindset. Internalized ableism is similar to internalized racism and internalized homophobia in that all those groups are absorbing negative messages about their communities on a daily basis, and then they encounter emotional or physical damage as a result.

Sometimes ableist messages are subtle, like when someone diminishes your effort and says things like "You're just being lazy" or discounts your sensory experiences by insisting that you're "overreacting." Other times you might encounter overt ableist incidents, such as people using derogatory terms or making fun of disabled people. If you hold multiple marginalized identities, you are likely navigating a complex web of internalized isms and are subjected to several layers of harmful messages on a regular basis. These toxic messages and internalized criticisms have a direct impact on both your emotional and physical health. While the process can be difficult, working to recognize and undo the damage they cause is an important facet of mental self-care.

If you find yourself descending into a neurodivergent shame spiral, take a moment to scan your thoughts and see if internalized ableism might be at the root. For instance, after experiencing an awkward social interaction or struggling to keep up with neurotypical expectations and pace of life, I used to berate myself, thinking, "Why can't you be like others? So-and-so can do it effortlessly. It's not that difficult." Now I catch these thoughts and recognize them for what they are: internalized ableism in action. Whenever we hold ourselves to neurotypical standards and condemn ourselves for not meeting them, we are experiencing internalized ableism in action.

Here are some other examples of instances of internalized ableism to watch for:

- **Self-doubt:** Doubting your abilities solely based on being Autistic, such as thinking, "I can't handle this task because I'm Autistic."
- **Apologizing for neurodivergent behaviors:** Feeling the need to apologize for behaviors that are natural expressions of neurodivergence, like saying, "Sorry for rambling" or "I'm sorry for being awkward."
- **Masking or camouflaging:** Adopting neurotypical behaviors or suppressing natural Autistic traits in order to fit in—for example, consciously mimicking neurotypical social norms or suppressing stimming.
- **Internalized stereotypes:** Believing negative stereotypes or societal misconceptions about autism, leading to negative self-perceptions.

If you recognize any of these examples happening to you, pause and ask yourself:

- "Is internalized ableism influencing this thought?"
- "Am I imposing neurotypical standards upon myself?"
- "What would I tell my Autistic friend (or child) in this moment?"

Bringing your awareness to this ableism is the first step in beginning to dismantle it emotionally. You have the power to challenge these negative thoughts and instead foster self-compassion, embrace your neurodivergent identity, and love yourself just as you are!

Drop "Functioning" Labels

Autistic Identity and Interests

One way we can work together to provide care to the Autistic community (and, in turn, self-care) is to nix the habit of applying "functioning" labels. Imagine if neurotypical people were asked their "functioning" levels—it would seem rude and judgmental. So why are we doing it to Autistic people?

Functioning labels also fail to capture the intricate complexities of people's skills and behaviors. For example, my functioning fluctuates greatly depending on my sensory environment, my level of burnout, and the energy expended on socializing and masking. Clearly, functioning levels exist on a fluid spectrum—which they do for most people!

Functioning labels also dismiss the challenges of Autistic people who mask, while simultaneously diminishing the strengths of nonspeaking Autistic people who possess rich inner worlds and have much to offer society.

Instead of relying on functioning labels, try to self-advocate by shifting the focus to support needs. This shift changes the conversation from how well you function to considering what supports can help you thrive. For example, someone with level 3 autism will require higher levels of support, so the focus should be on discussing their needs and the needs of their families who provide daily support. Individuals with level 1 autism may have fewer intensive daily living-support needs but tend to have high mental health support needs and benefit from specific mental health and sensory supports.

By reframing this conversation from functioning labels to support needs, we move beyond the limitations of functioning labels and redirect the conversation toward the vital supports that empower us to flourish.

Spend Time Unmasked

Autistic Identity and Interests

Many Autistic traits are actually innate strategies we use to calm our bodies. For example, avoiding eye contact helps calm the amygdala (the brain's fear/emotion center), and engaging in stimming helps regulate senses. However, those of us who mask our Autistic traits suppress these natural instincts that regulate our bodies and brains. No wonder many of us are burned out and struggling with our mental health—we are overriding our natural self-soothing mechanisms! If you instead intentionally spend time unmasking, you can relax and enjoy behaviors that naturally support and soothe you.

Masking also involves contorting your communication to fit in with the dominant culture. Translating Autistic speech to allistic speech takes a lot of energy from your prefrontal cortex (the front part of your brain, in charge of thinking and decision-making). It turns out that your brain needs to work really hard to translate your direct, efficient Autistic speech into indirect, nonefficient allistic speech!

When you unmask your communication, you give yourself permission to speak directly and candidly, embrace divergent conversations, and skip the small talk that can be so draining. It's a powerful brain break that can help you recharge and feel more centered.

The next time you're feeling burned out, it might be because you're drained from masking. To recharge, find a safe space to unmask, either with other Autistic people, a trusted friend or family member, or simply on your own. Just ensure you're in a safe space to do so. Your body and your brain will thank you for it.

Welcome Autistic Stimming

Autistic Identity and Interests

Stimming is a natural and comforting behavior many Autistic people engage in. It can take many forms, from hand flapping to twirling to rocking back and forth to auditory or vocal stimming, where the person repeats a song or makes repetitive sounds. While stimming might seem strange or even concerning to some non-Autistic people, it is an integral part of many Autistic people's experience.

One of the reasons Autistic people stim is because it helps soothe our sensory systems. The extra sensory input that stimming provides can be helpful when we're feeling overloaded, overwhelmed, or even excited by our environment. Stimming is our brain's way of helping us out when things get overwhelming—it is like our personal tool kit for dealing with sensory overload.

Here are some benefits of stimming:

- **It redirects attention:** Stimming helps us tune out the clutter around us because we focus on a sensory activity we enjoy.
- **It provides control and homeostasis:** When in overwhelming environments, stimming helps us focus on sensory stuff we can control and provides enough input to help us block out what we can't control. Stimming provides a sense of predictability and mastery in an otherwise unpredictable environment. Additionally, it creates a sense of homeostasis, offering comfort and security. You know what's coming when you stim, and that can be comforting when navigating an unpredictable situation!
- **It feels soothing:** Actions like rocking and tapping can be really calming—partly because it may influence our brain chemistry! Engaging in stimming activities may increase dopamine, glutamate, and aspartate, which can lead to a sense of calm and relaxation, making us feel relaxed.

- **It satisfies sensory seekers:** Stimming can also be a form of sensory seeking. Sometimes, our environment doesn't give us the sensory input we crave. Stimming helps us get the comfort we need.

And there's even more good news! Research suggests that stimming, particularly rhythmic movements like rocking and swaying, may actually release endorphins in the brain. These feel-good chemicals can help boost your mood and reduce feelings of pain and discomfort.

If you're an Autistic person who stims, know that you're not alone and there's nothing wrong with you. Stimming is a valuable and important part of who you are! Embrace your sensory needs and find the stims that work best for you. Whether it's pacing, stim dancing, hand flapping, twirling your hair, or tapping your foot, your body knows what it needs to feel calm and comfortable. So stim on!

Regulate Emotions Through Movement

Autistic Identity and Interests

In high school, even before I knew I was Autistic, I engaged in all sorts of rhythmic activities. I would come home from school and go on long Rollerblade rides with Spice Girls playing on my Walkman. And at night I'd dance it out behind closed doors to the best music the nineties had to offer.

It turns out my interest in music and dancing may have been partly related to my autism. Autistic people thrive on repetitive, rhythmic movement. Autistic bodies tend to generate excess energy and benefit from releasing that energy at the end of the day. When we don't find a way to release this energy, it tends to sneak out through emotional or sensory meltdowns!

That's where rhythmic movement comes in—it's one of the most powerful tools in our mental health tool kit! If dancing isn't your thing, you can find other rhythmic activities that work for you, like pacing, bouncing on a yoga ball, jumping, or Rollerblading.

Rhythmic movement not only lets you release pent-up energy and emotions; it also helps you connect with your body in a positive way. It's a way to bring your attention out of your head and into the positive sensations of your body. This can be grounding and help you feel more present and anchored in the moment. When you're more grounded in your body, you're more easily able to connect to your mental experience.

Dancing also stimulates a beneficial surge of dopamine, your body's "feel-good" neurotransmitter! Additionally, it helps lower levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress (which is often high in Autistic people).

So whether you're dancing it out or engaging in other rhythmic activities, take some time to connect with your body and notice the physical sensations. With practice, you may just find it easier to embrace the positive aspects of having a body.

Identify Your Values

Autistic Identity and Interests

Autistic people tend to be very value driven. After all, values are woven into the fabric of your identity, shaping how you see yourself and the world around you. When you find yourself in situations that conflict with your values, it can be emotionally draining and create inner turmoil. On the other hand, when you are aligned with your values and doing things that reflect who you are and what you care about, it brings a sense of clarity and purpose to your life and helps you feel anchored in your authentic self.

Identifying your values is a good first step toward living a life that is in sync with them. As a reflection exercise, take a moment to list out your top five values. They could be political ideals, personal passions, or anything else that matters deeply to you.

Here are examples of values:

- Equality and inclusivity
- Curiosity and learning
- Autonomy and independence
- Creativity
- Authenticity
- Animal rights
- Personal growth
- Spirituality
- Sustainability

Alternatively, if you online search for "value card sort," you'll find online versions of this exercise that provide more guidance and structure.

When you're feeling disconnected from yourself, consider connecting with one of your values through an activity that resonates with it. By doing so, you are aligning with your core self.

Your values are not just things you have—they are integral to who you are. Embracing your values is one way of embracing and celebrating your Autistic identity. Consciously living in sync with your foundational values is an effective way to take care of your body, mind, and spirit.

Celebrate Your Special Interests

Autistic Identity and Interests

My brain works in self-contained worlds that I refer to as "ecosystems." I see connections, links, patterns, and relations in everything. When I become passionate about something, I must understand it in its entirety. This is what I call the "special interest ecosystem." This might sound familiar to you, because approaching interests in this deep way is actually a common trait of Autistic people.

My special interest ecosystem has become a crucial part of my self-care routine. When I'm feeling overwhelmed or stressed, I turn to my interests for comfort and grounding because they provide a sense of stability and familiarity.

Your interests not only are deeply integrated into your identity but also can be incredibly soothing. They can help you reduce stress, emotionally regulate, and access a wellspring of energy to help you feel more grounded. You can find comfort and safety in the deep understanding you have about your areas of interest. As a bonus, connecting with other people about your areas of interest is a powerful way to forge and strengthen connections and relationships.

However, many Autistic people resist leaning into their special interests. Society often views these interests as abnormal or obsessive, which can lead to internalized shame and embarrassment. This mindset can make it challenging to embrace the power of your special interest energy for self-soothing.

Try flipping the script on any negative associations you may have with your interests and celebrate them instead. After all, the energy behind special interests can drive innovation, creativity, and social change. Many groundbreaking inventions and movements have come from people deeply passionate about particular subjects. For example, Greta Thunberg's interest in environmental justice has ignited a spark within millions, inspiring them to rally against the threat of climate collapse. Similarly, Steve Jobs,

cofounder of Apple, was known for his obsession with the convergence of technology and design, which reshaped the technological landscape. (Note: While Jobs exhibited numerous Autistic traits, there is no definitive evidence to confirm he was Autistic.)

Because interests and identity are so interwoven for Autistic people, embracing your interests is a form of embracing your identity. You will cultivate a strong sense of self through your interests, making them a foundational part of your mental self-care.

To integrate special interests into self-care, consider reserving specific time for delving into your passions, using your interests as emotional-regulation tools, weaving your hobbies into daily activities, or leveraging them to cultivate social connections. See what resonates with you—the key is to not be ashamed of your level of interest. By embracing these interests and incorporating them into your self-care routine, you can find a sense of stability and familiarity in a world that often feels overwhelming and unpredictable.

Build and Cooperate with Your Health Care Team

Self-Advocacy in Mental Health Care

Establishing a collaborative relationship with your health care team, including prescribers and primary care providers, is a cornerstone for navigating your mental health as an Autistic person. This partnership not only puts your distinct medical needs front of mind but also supports adept management of any necessary medications. (Note: While there is no prescribed medication specifically for autism, many Autistic individuals benefit from therapeutic pharmaceutical intervention to manage co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, PTSD, OCD, and others.)

For many Autistic people, navigating the health care industry can be overwhelming due to various challenges, including sensory sensitivities, executive functioning challenges, communication differences, and frequent medical visits due to co-occurring conditions. Therefore, it's a powerful act of self-care to develop a collaborative relationship with your medical team.

Here are some strategies for forging such relationships:

- **Identify autism-informed professionals:** Try to find health care practitioners who are experienced in caring for Autistic people and knowledgeable about autism's intricacies. They should understand common co-occurring conditions, sensory sensitivities, and potential medication interactions affecting Autistic individuals.
- **Get recommendations from Autistic communities:** Recommendations from local or online Autistic communities can provide potential leads to Autistic-affirming providers. Autism advocacy organizations might also have lists of providers.

- **Foster an open dialogue:** Make it a point to communicate your concerns, needs, and goals. Take an active role in sharing essential details about your sensory sensitivities, pain, and medication history and any side effects you experience. It's important to note that Autistic people tend to be more sensitive to medication and may experience medication side effects more frequently than their non-Autistic counterparts. Also, the ways Autistic people express distress or discomfort can be different from allistic expectations, which can sometimes lead to misinterpretation by providers. Thus, maintaining open communication is vital to ensuring your symptoms are correctly understood and addressed.
- **Write down your concerns:** If you find yourself flustered during medical visits, prepare ahead by jotting down critical points or questions. This helps ensure you articulate your concerns effectively and can aid your self-advocacy efforts.
- **Consider recording your appointments:** If it's challenging to remember visit details, ask if you can audio record the session for later reference, particularly if instructions are being shared.
- **Advocate for regular monitoring:** Regular health check-ins and medication management are crucial, particularly considering the heightened likelihood of medication side effects. Teletherapy can offer an accessible alternative with fewer sensory concerns for these ongoing assessments or nonemergency consultations.
- **Join in the decision-making process:** Engage actively in your health care decisions. Understand the potential benefits and risks of proposed treatments, and collaborate with your provider in making informed choices.

Ideally, you will be able to find a health care professional who is knowledgeable about autism. In situations where autism-informed providers are not available, finding a provider who at least takes a collaborative approach and who is open to learning about autism can go a long way!

Address Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions

Self-Advocacy in Mental Health Care

It's important to underscore that autism, a form of neurodivergence, is not in and of itself a condition that warrants treatment. However, many Autistic people face co-occurring mental health conditions that, if unmanaged, can significantly affect their well-being. Treating these coexisting conditions is really important for maintaining good mental health.

Co-occurring mental health conditions can include anxiety, depression, PTSD, OCD, and other conditions. Furthermore, many Autistic individuals also experience other forms of neurodivergence, including ADHD and dyslexia, that benefit from targeted support. These coexisting conditions and forms of neurodivergence can amplify daily life challenges and impact the mental health of Autistic people.

Here are some strategies to navigate mental health care effectively:

- **Explore personalized management of co-occurring conditions:** There is a myriad of therapeutic approaches available to address co-occurring conditions, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), Internal Family Systems (IFS), somatic-based therapies, and trauma-focused therapy. Each of these therapies offers strategies to tackle specific challenges. While there's no "one-size-fits-all" therapy for Autistic people due to our broad diversity, many of us respond well to somatic-based therapies, relational and interpersonal therapies, and IFS. Traditional cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) may not suit all of us, with ACT and DBT often providing beneficial alternatives for those seeking structured approaches.

- **Find a neurodivergent-affirming therapist:** Neurodivergent-affirming therapists think of autism as a valid part of your identity (versus a disorder to fix). Finding a therapist who values your autism as a part of your identity and will help you integrate it into your sense of self and work through internalized shame, neurodivergent trauma, and more is a powerful investment in your mental health (see Find a Neurodivergent-Affirming Provider in this chapter for tips on what to look for).
- **Consider pharmacological intervention:** In some instances, medication can alleviate symptoms of coexisting conditions. Develop a collaborative relationship with a psychiatrist or prescribing health care professional to ensure appropriate medication prescription and effective monitoring (see Build and Cooperate with Your Health Care Team in this chapter for more tips on cultivating a collaborative relationship with your prescriber).
- **Develop coping mechanisms:** Learning and implementing coping strategies enhances your ability to manage symptoms and navigate daily life. Strategies can include stress-management techniques, nervous system regulation strategies, emotional-regulation skills, sensory self-care practices, and mindfulness. You can find lots of ideas in this book to get you started, then a therapist can offer additional guidance.
- **Connect with supportive communities:** Getting in touch with supportive communities, both online and offline, can foster a sense of understanding and belonging. Your engagement with neurodivergent groups or networks can provide valuable resources, validation, and support.

Addressing co-occurring mental health conditions is a way to commit to prioritizing your mental health while empowering yourself to flourish and thrive.

Find a Neurodivergent-Affirming Provider

Self-Advocacy in Mental Health Care

Identifying a mental health professional who will respect and advocate for neurodivergence can be a pivotal element of your mental health journey. To assist in this pursuit, consider the following green and red flags during your search:

GREEN FLAGS

Look for "green flags," or indications that a health care provider embraces and validates neurodivergence, such as:

- **Inclusive language:** Professionals who use identity-first language (e.g., "Autistic" versus "has autism" or "with autism") when discussing autism and neurodivergence convey respect and understanding of Autistic culture and people.
- **Affirmation of neurodiversity:** Look for providers who openly affirm neurodiversity and explicitly state their commitment to respect and celebrate neurodivergent identities.
- **Culturally competent care:** Professionals employing an intersectional framework to understand the experiences and challenges of intersecting identities—such as being Autistic and a member of another marginalized community—are likely to offer more nuanced and comprehensive care.
- **Emphasis on autonomy and agency:** Therapists who stress your autonomy, choice, and agency in treatment decisions respect you as an active participant in your health care journey.
- **Accessibility:** Providers who proactively make their practices more accessible—for instance, by offering flexible scheduling options, providing accommodations for sensory sensitivities, and using alternative communication methods—demonstrate practical understanding of the needs of Autistic clients.

RED FLAGS

On the other hand, be very wary if you see any of these potential "red flags":

- **Emphasis on applied behavior analysis (ABA):** While ABA is a commonly recommended therapy, its focus on compliance can be detrimental to Autistic individuals. A provider heavily promoting or exclusively recommending ABA often does not align with neurodivergent perspectives.
- **Use of pathologizing language:** Be attentive to the language used by health care professionals when discussing autism. Frequent use of terms like "autism spectrum disorder (ASD)" or other pathologizing language may indicate an approach focused on treating autism as a problem to be fixed rather than recognizing it as an integral aspect of human neurodiversity.
- **"Fix-it" mentality:** Be cautious of health care professionals who often discuss "curing autism" or "improving social skills." If a provider suggests that the aim of treatment is to make an individual more "neurotypical," they are operating from a deficit-based framework—in other words, assuming that something about you needs to be "fixed." This mindset overlooks the value of neurodiversity, emphasizing "fixing" perceived issues rather than fostering personal growth and well-being within an individual's unique neurological context.

You can also turn to resources like Neurodivergent Therapists (NDTherapists.com), the Association of Neurodivergent Therapists (which is a UK directory), Therapy Den, and Inclusive Therapists to provide directories of therapists identifying as neurodivergent or affirming neurodivergent identities.

Lastly, trust your instincts. If you don't feel understood, respected, or comfortable during your initial interaction with a provider, it may be worthwhile to extend your search. Take your time, conduct thorough research, and prioritize your mental and physical well-being throughout this process. Finding the right fit is key to successful therapy, so it's worth your time and effort.

Explore the Benefits and Drawbacks of Formal Diagnosis

Self-Advocacy in Mental Health Care

Navigating your neurology is a deeply personal undertaking. For many Autistic people, seeking a formal diagnosis marks a significant milestone in our quest for enhanced mental well-being. However, this is often a mixed experience with benefits and challenges. Your experiences, resources, and societal factors will influence this process. While a formal diagnosis can be a powerful tool, Autistic identity transcends medical labels and flourishes instead in the community's richness of diversity, unique strengths, and personal experiences. If a formal diagnosis is on your radar, it's a good idea to weigh its potential advantages and disadvantages.

Benefits of Diagnosis

- **Validation and self-understanding:** A formal diagnosis can offer a sense of validation. It can provide an explanation for lifelong struggles and differences and bring you enhanced self-understanding and a clearer sense of your identity. It can also bring about relief and empowerment, enabling you to advocate more effectively for yourself.
- **Access to resources and supports:** A formal diagnosis often serves as a gateway to specialized support and services. This could include therapies, educational and work accommodations, disability services, and potential financial aid.

Drawbacks of Diagnosis

- **Pathologizing:** The medical model of disability often pathologizes neurodivergent identities. A formal diagnosis can sometimes foster a perception of being "disordered" or "deficient," potentially affecting self-esteem and overall well-being.
- **Accessibility and cost:** Gaining access to a formal diagnosis can be a hurdle due to factors such as geographic location, availability of specialists, and financial barriers. The diagnostic process can be costly and time-consuming, often with extended waitlists.
- **Potential stigma:** Despite increasing societal acceptance, the stigma associated with autism still persists. A diagnosis can sometimes lead to prejudiced attitudes, discrimination, and exclusion in various settings, including schools and workplaces.
- **Misdiagnosis:** Unfortunately, some clinicians have yet to update their understanding of autism, adhering instead to outdated stereotypes. As a result, if you are a woman, genderqueer, or a person of color, or if you deviate from the stereotypical autism profile, you may navigate the diagnostic process only to face the risk of being misdiagnosed.
- **Migration limitations:** Certain countries impose restrictions on immigration for individuals with an autism diagnoses, which could limit opportunities for international living.
- **Medical disparities:** In some cases, having a diagnosis of autism can potentially influence medical decision-making processes, such as organ transplant eligibility or access to gender-affirming care, due to misconceptions about the capacity and quality of life of Autistic individuals.

The decision to seek an autism diagnosis is deeply personal and should be tailored to your individual needs, circumstances, and preferences. Regardless of whether you pursue a formal diagnosis, remember that your experiences and identity as an Autistic person are valid. You have the right to understand yourself, advocate for your needs, and seek acceptance and respect.

Reframe Your Autistic Childhood Experiences

Autistic Mindset and Well-Being

A meaningful part of embracing your Autistic identity can be journeying back to your past, particularly your childhood, to reconsider and reinterpret those experiences through a new lens. Your history probably includes stories of your Autistic traits being misinterpreted, misunderstood, or even wrongly labeled as "character flaws" by yourself or others. Consequently, your self-perception and memories might be clouded by a sense of otherness, bewilderment, confusion, and shame.

As you deepen your grasp of your Autistic identity, you can reframe your past with newfound understanding. If you were once seen as being an isolated "loner," you can now understand that alone time is the manifestation of enjoyment of your rich inner landscape. Your aversions to specific textures or sounds, once deemed "picky" or "overreactive," were, in fact, your sensory system interacting with the world in a uniquely Autistic way. Your perceived "rudeness" was just your way of being direct, honest, and transparent. Those meltdowns were your body's natural response to sensory overload. Your passion—far from being "too much"—was a beautiful testament to your value-driven and passionate way of being in the world.

Reframing your narrative with this newfound lens can be a transformative mental health exercise. You are not "broken" or "flawed"; you simply perceive and interact with the world uniquely. Embracing your Autistic identity allows you to view your past self with compassion, appreciating the strength it took to navigate a world that didn't understand you. This process can cultivate empathy for the misunderstood child you once were while honoring the resilience that propelled you to where you are today.

Forgive Yourself

Autistic Mindset and Well-Being

People often ask how my late-in-life diagnosis has impacted me. My initial response usually revolves around one significant aspect: the awakening of self-compassion. My diagnosis essentially granted me permission to quiet my inner critic and extend kindness toward myself—a newfound experience. Through the lens of understanding my Autistic identity, I can finally release the perception of my "faults" that I once carried, cultivate a mindset of gentleness and self-forgiveness for past mistakes, and embrace realistic expectations for my future.

Reframing your narrative in a similar way will allow you to view your past self with greater gentleness. In addition to having self-compassion for your Autistic traits and limits, which you may have misinterpreted as character flaws, it's important to recognize that there may be other aspects for which you need to offer yourself forgiveness.

For example, perhaps there were moments when you engaged in actions that did not align with your values. You may have misused alcohol or substances as a coping mechanism for sensory and social challenges, or you may have fallen into other addiction to numb the pain. You may have hurt people you care about, or maybe you had some relationships end because you didn't yet know who you were and how to communicate your needs effectively. If you resorted to unhealthy strategies while striving to survive in a world not designed for you, know that you're not alone—you were doing the best you could with the resources and knowledge you had at the time.

Strive to release any blame, regret, and shame and redirect your focus toward embracing self-forgiveness and kindness, lightening the load on your mind and spirit.

Grieve Your Limits

Autistic Mindset and Well-Being

My autism diagnosis led me to feel liberation, pride—and also grief. The most profound moments of grief emerge when I come face-to-face with my own limits. These limits encompass sensory limits, energy limits, and social limits. If I ignore these limits, I'm making myself susceptible to burnout and chronic health conditions.

When I discovered I was Autistic, I changed career paths. I realized that working as a professor within an academic institute or working full-time in a hospital setting would utterly burn me out. There was grief in this realization, but on the other side of that grief was freedom. I restructured my life, built a company called Neurodivergent Insights, and embarked on a career that worked with my sensory, social, and energy limits. In order to find this happiness, I needed to both acknowledge and grieve my limits.

Grieving your limits is an ongoing process, not a one-time experience. Maybe one day you wake up and encounter a wall of fatigue, experience intensified executive functioning struggles, or strain to keep up with the demands of parenting. In these moments, it's perfectly fine to grieve your limits once again. However, on the other side of that grief is freedom: When you grieve your limits, you can actually construct realistic expectations and release yourself from the guilt of not conforming to the pace of your allistic peers. It's much better for your mental health to cultivate a pace and life that works for you and honors your limits!

Celebrate Your Authenticity with an Identity Board

Autistic Mindset and Well-Being

Autistic people often grapple with identity questions—especially those of us who have spent our lives masking our true selves. Masking can result in a diffuse sense of self, making it challenging to understand who you truly are. Engaging in activities that encourage self-reflection can be a powerful way to reclaim your identity. One fun and creative way to do that is to craft an "identity board," which is a visual and creative representation of your core values, interests, and identities.

To create an identity board, you have a few options:

- **Handcraft an identity board:** Gather images that reflect your core values, identities, and interests from magazines or online sources, then arrange them and glue them to a poster board. Add meaningful words, quotes, and symbols to create a visual representation of your authentic self.
- **Design a digital identity board:** Create a Pinterest or Canva board dedicated to your identity exploration. Search for images, quotes, and articles that align with your core values and reflect your interests. One advantage of a digital board is that it allows for even easier editing and updating as you continue to explore and develop your sense of self.

No matter which method you prefer, look for images that bring you joy and reflect your authentic self. When you're done for now, hang the board up where you can see and enjoy it regularly, or, if digital, make it readily accessible to pull up and visit. Let your board evolve alongside you, updating it every once in a while so that it can help fuel your journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-expression.

Practice Gray Thinking

Mental Health Resilience

All-or-nothing thinking—in which an event is either perceived as perfect or a complete failure—is common among Autistic people. During my early years as a mother, this mindset manifested as constant self-criticism about my parenting. Being Autistic, sleep-deprived, and raising two neurodivergent children, I wasn't always perfect (not even close!). However, due to all-or-nothing thinking, whenever I handled something imperfectly, I took that as evidence I was a terrible mother. Similarly, if I made a mistake in a friendship, I would distance myself, convinced that I was a wholly inadequate friend and had ruined the friendship.

This type of thinking can be detrimental to your mental health because it amplifies self-judgment and creates unrealistic expectations. It also sets you up for feelings of depression, low self-confidence, and disappointment. Whether it's one small setback in your day or a minor mishap in social situations, this kind of thinking tends to lead to inner criticism and a sense of failure.

The antidote to all-or-nothing thinking is practicing "gray thinking"—in other words, understanding that there *is* a middle ground and that mistakes and setbacks are a natural part of life. Catching instances of all-or-nothing thinking and then reframing them with more nuanced thoughts is a way of practicing gray thinking. For example, instead of labeling myself a terrible mother, I could acknowledge, "I am a good mother, and I didn't handle that situation like I wish I had."

And for some extra support, consider trying this simple yet effective linguistic trick to help get out of all-or-nothing thinking and toward more gray thinking. Pay attention to how you often use the word "but" to disqualify or negate something that's otherwise good. For instance, you might say, "The party was nice, but I made a fool of myself by being awkward." Notice how the second part of the sentence invalidates the positive aspect.

Instead, replace "but" with "and." For example, "The party was nice, *and* I had an awkward moment." Or "Today was a good day, *and* there were some challenging moments."

This small linguistic shift will help you challenge the binary thinking pattern and embrace a more nuanced perspective. It allows you to acknowledge positive and challenging aspects of your experiences, fostering a balanced and resilient mindset.

If you try to adopt a mindset of gray thinking, you can operate with more realistic expectations for yourself and acknowledge hardship without spiraling. This shift in perspective allows you to approach life's challenges with the compassion you deserve and the resilience inside you.

Beware of Confirmation Bias

Mental Health Resilience

Our minds are remarkable at scanning the world for evidence that supports our preexisting beliefs or hypotheses. This concept, known as confirmation bias, plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions of reality. Your brain naturally prioritizes information confirming your preconceived notions while downplaying or disregarding contradictory evidence. This shortcut helps your brain process information more efficiently so you can attempt to manage the vast amount of information you encounter daily. While it's a helpful shortcut, it can also cause distorted perceptions of reality.

This bias manifests in various aspects of our lives. For instance, people struggling with anxiety might selectively focus on evidence that confirms their anxious thoughts, while those who believe they are incompetent may fixate on instances in which they feel they made a mistake. Or if you believe someone doesn't like you, your mind will look for evidence of slights they've made toward you.

It's also crucial to acknowledge that the influence of confirmation bias extends beyond individual experiences and plays a role in shaping societal narratives. Confirmation bias can contribute to the perpetuation of harmful racial stereotypes and the formation of inaccurate beliefs about groups of people.

Awareness of confirmation bias is the first step in mitigating its influence. To counter these thoughts when they become apparent, first notice and name what filter you have on and then try seeking out diverse or alternative lenses or perspectives and engage in conversations that challenge your existing beliefs. This can help broaden your understanding and reduce the impact of confirmation bias on your decision-making.

Expose the Stories Your Brain Is Telling You

Mental Health Resilience

Our minds are master storytellers. As soon as we have experiences, our minds are off and running, telling wild stories related to the events. These stories unfold rapidly and automatically, often slipping under our radar. For example, after an awkward social interaction or a mistake on an assignment, your mind may spin stories like "I am socially awkward" or "I am incompetent."

Recognizing and "catching" the story that your mind is telling you at any given moment is a powerful practice. By becoming aware of the narrative playing in your mind, you gain the opportunity to expose it, unhook from it, and reclaim agency over your mind.

To do this, ask yourself: "What is the story my mind is currently weaving?" Just the act of acknowledging the story reduces its hold on you. Alternatively, you could try envisioning the narrative as a movie you're watching or a book you're reading. Contemplate, "What title would best encapsulate this cinematic or literary creation?" This exercise acknowledges the story's presence (thereby diminishing its influence) while also enabling you to perceive it as a distinct entity rather than an unquestionable reality.

Thinking of your thoughts as stories can help you detach from their grip and allow you to create more empowering narratives that align with your true self.

Change Your Relationship to Your Thoughts

Mental Health Resilience

Your thoughts have a profound impact on your mental well-being. While certain therapies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), emphasize changing your thoughts, many Autistic people find that engaging in these techniques can have adverse effects. It can feel invalidating or dismissive of our experiences of marginalization. Or it can lead to a rebound effect, where we become more entrenched in a wrestling match with our thoughts, resulting in heightened internal debates and increased distress.

Due to the unique ability many Autistic people have to perceive things from multiple angles, changing your thoughts may not always be effective. In my personal experience, and from what I've observed in many Autistic people, we tend to have better luck when we *change our relationship to our thoughts versus changing our thoughts themselves.* By changing your relationship with your thoughts, you can cultivate a healthier and more balanced connection with them.

As discussed in the Expose the Stories Your Brain Is Telling You entry in this chapter, one way to deal with this is to remember that you don't have to believe every thought that comes into your mind. Instead, try thinking of your mind as a third party that's coming up with these ideas.

For instance, when I notice negative self-talk, I might say, "*My mind* is telling me I'm not good right now." Similarly, in therapy sessions, I might reflect to a client, "So *your mind* is going on about how bad you are right now." By treating your mind as if it were another entity, you gain a sense of distance. This practice allows you to observe the mind's thoughts without automatically accepting them as facts or absolute truths.

Another technique to unhook from your thoughts is cognitive defusion. It involves recognizing that thoughts are mental events and not objective truths. By envisioning thoughts as passing clouds in the sky or trains swiftly moving by, you can practice allowing them to come and go without becoming entangled in their content. This metaphorical perspective helps cultivate a sense of detachment as you observe your thoughts from a distance without feeling compelled to act upon or believe every single one.

For a brief self-check, courtesy of my colleague Wes Gos, an Autistic therapist hailing from Canada, ask yourself: "Are you having the thought or is the thought having you?" If you discover that the thought is the one orchestrating the show, it's time to create some distance from it and see if you can unhook!

Practicing self-compassion is another powerful way to unhook from painful thoughts. You might consider offering gentleness instead of harshly judging yourself or getting caught in self-criticism. Normalizing the experience of intrusive or unhelpful thoughts can reduce their impact. Rather than engaging in a fight with the accuracy of the thought, you can instead simply acknowledge it as a painful thought you are experiencing.

The goal is not to eliminate all negative or distressing thoughts—that's unrealistic—but rather to relate to them in a healthier and more balanced way. By changing your relationship to your thoughts, you can cultivate greater mental flexibility and a sense of inner spaciousness and freedom.

Identify Cognitive Distortions

Mental Health Resilience

Our minds are remarkably sneaky and deceptive, employing filters known as cognitive distortions. These filters can subtly influence our mental well-being, often leading to negative thoughts and self-judgment.

To understand cognitive distortions, think of them as akin to wearing blue-tinted sunglasses that color everything you see. Just as the blue tint distorts your visual perception, cognitive distortions skew your understanding of reality, reinforce negative beliefs, and contribute to emotional suffering.

Becoming aware of these distortions allows you to distance yourself and release from their grip. Rather than trying to argue your way out of them, you may benefit more from learning to unhook from these distortions—as I have found to be the case with Autistic people I have worked with.

Here are some common cognitive distortions to be mindful of:

- **All-or-nothing thinking:** This involves perceiving situations in extreme terms of either success or failure without considering the gray areas in between. It can limit your ability to see nuance, hinder problem-solving, and lead to overly negative thinking. See more on this topic in the Practice Gray Thinking entry in this chapter.
- **Overgeneralization:** This involves drawing broad conclusions based on limited evidence or a single negative experience. It can perpetuate negative beliefs, contribute to self-doubt, and create a narrow and biased perception of yourself and the world.
- **Jumping to conclusions:** This occurs when you make negative assumptions or interpretations without sufficient evidence. It can fuel anxiety, strain relationships, and lead to misunderstandings as you rush to judgment without considering alternative explanations or gathering enough information.

- **Emotional reasoning:** This involves basing the truth or validity of a thought on your emotions rather than on objective evidence. For example, if you feel anxious about giving a presentation and think, "I feel so anxious, so I must be terrible at public speaking," you're engaging in emotional reasoning. This cognitive distortion can intensify emotional distress as your feelings dictate your thoughts and decisions.
- **Mind reading:** This occurs when you assume, without concrete evidence, that you know what others are thinking or how they perceive you. It can undermine your self-confidence, create social anxiety, and lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings in your interactions with others.
- **Future telling:** Future telling involves making predictions and assumptions about future events, often based on limited information or personal biases. This can lead to excessive worry, anxiety, and an unrealistic focus on worst-case scenarios.

Consider which distortions your mind is prone to. The next time you notice your mind filtering your reality through these lenses, pause and mindfully name what is happening. For example, say, "Right now, my mind is engaging in mind reading about what others think of me." Identifying the cognitive distortion in action helps you unhook from the painful thoughts and scripts, loosening their grip in the moment and empowering you to reclaim agency over your own thinking. Keep in mind the goal is not to eliminate these thoughts entirely—that's not realistic—but rather to reduce their grasp on you in the present moment, enhance your sense of agency, and improve your mental health (remember, try and have the thought versus letting the thought have you!).

Get Unhooked: Eight Ways to Unhook from Painful Thoughts

Mental Health Resilience

Unhooking or defusing from painful thoughts is a skill commonly taught in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). This practice can be very helpful if you're prone to anxious thoughts, negative self-talk, rumination, or the frequent intrusion of cognitive distortions into your mind!

Here are some strategies to help you break free from distressing and painful thoughts:

- **Thought labeling:** Practice thought labeling by saying, "I am noticing I am having the thought that..." before your distressing thought. This simple act helps you create distance from the thought and see it for what it is—a painful thought your mind is "gifting" you.
- **Silly songs:** Put your painful thoughts to a silly song, like the birthday song or a nursery rhyme. Sing the thought out loud with playful tunes to lessen its grip.
- **Cloud visualization:** Imagine your distressing thought as a cloud passing by in the sky. Watch it drift away without holding on to it. Recognize that thoughts, like clouds, come and go. You can also use alternative imagery such as a passing train, a car driving by, or a leaf floating down a stream.
- **Mindful observation:** Engage in mindful observation by describing the details of your distressing thought. Observe it as you would a painting, noticing its colors, shapes, and patterns.
- **Thanking your mind:** Thank your mind for generating the thought, recognizing that it's trying to protect you. Then gently let it know that you've got things covered for now.

- **Breathing and releasing:** As you breathe in, acknowledge your painful thought. As you breathe out, imagine releasing it with your exhale. This practice helps you let go of the thought's hold on you.
- **Thought sculpting:** Treat your thought as a sculptor would clay. Mold it into amusing shapes or characters to make it less intimidating.
- **A gratitude ritual:** Practice a short gratitude ritual by naming three things you're grateful for whenever a distressing thought arises. This practice redirects your attention toward positivity (our brains have a hard time redirecting attention when hooked, and the gratitude ritual helps with this!).

You can employ these techniques whenever you become aware of a cognitive distortion, distressing narrative, or challenging thought. By disengaging from these painful thoughts, you regain a sense of control, enabling you to decide how you wish to address and manage them. This process also frees up valuable mental space, allowing you to reclaim your precious mental real estate to invest it in the things you value and care about!

Practice Mindfulness on the Go

Mental Health Resilience

We know that mindfulness is good for mental health. You've likely heard this hundreds of times! However, mindfulness can be challenging for neurodivergent people (especially those of us whose autism comes with a side of ADHD).

Sitting down and attempting to do a traditional mindfulness exercise is frustrating and exhausting for me. It isn't active enough, so my mind naturally diverges a hundred ways! For this reason, I prefer mindfulness-on-the-go activities, and you might as well.

Try to think of mindfulness as a way of being with yourself more so than a quiet, still activity. Whenever you observe your thoughts without judgment or evaluation, you are being mindful. You can do this wherever you are, and you don't need to engage in a traditional mindfulness exercise like meditation to relate to yourself in this way! One helpful way to conceptualize mindfulness is to think of your mind in two parts: the part that's observing things and the part that's evaluating them.

In daily life, we often operate from the evaluative part of our minds, where we constantly assess and judge our experiences. Consider a scenario where you're giving a presentation. As you speak, thoughts flood your mind, evaluating your performance: "Am I speaking clearly enough? Did I miss any important points? Are people engaged?" These evaluative thoughts arise almost automatically, shaping your perception of the situation and influencing your emotions—and they're not an example of being mindful.

Your observing brain, on the other hand, acts as a detached observer and narrator. When you're observing, you simply witness and acknowledge the present moment without judgment. For example, you might think, "This is a challenging moment right now" or "I feel stressed about that interaction" as you observe and narrate your experience. Embracing you observing mind enables you to cultivate nonjudgmental awareness and practice mindfulness wherever you are.

Here are some mindfulness-on-the-go activities that you can incorporate into your daily life:

- **Identify the script:** Become aware of the recurring thoughts or patterns that arise in your mind. Notice the narratives or stories that play out, and recognize them as mental scripts.
- **Name the thought:** Practice labeling your thoughts with a simple observation, such as "I am noticing I am having the thought ____." For example, if the thought "I'm not good enough" arises, you might say, "I am noticing I am having the thought 'I'm not good enough.'" This naming process brings your observing mind online, which helps create distance from the thought and allows you to gain a mindful perspective into your current experience.
- **Separate yourself a bit from your mind:** Engage in a conversation with your mind, treating it as a separate entity, and don't be afraid to add a touch of sass as you interact with it!

Mindfulness does not always have to be about maintaining a fixed state of focus. Instead, just relate to your thoughts with openness, nonjudgment, and curiosity.

Expand Your "Window of Tolerance"

Mental Health Resilience

The "window of tolerance" is a concept that represents your body's capacity to handle and respond to various levels of stress. When you are within your window of tolerance, you are in a balanced state, able to think clearly, engage with others, and handle everyday stressors effectively.

When you exceed the upper threshold of your window, you may enter a *hyper*aroused state characterized by anxiety, agitation, and panic. On the other hand, if you drop below the threshold, you may enter a *hypo*aroused state marked by dissociation, fatigue, numbness, and a sense of detachment.

Neurodivergent people tend to have a narrower window of tolerance, meaning we more easily flip into a stressed state. However, the good news is you can teach it how to expand, allowing you to handle a broader range of emotional and sensory experiences. By actively working on expanding your window of tolerance, you can enhance resilience and navigate challenging situations with greater ease, since you're responding from a place of balance and inner harmony.

Here are some ways to cultivate a wider window of tolerance:

- **Practice self-regulation:** Self-regulation skills help you recognize and manage your emotions effectively. Grounding techniques and relaxation strategies can help you regulate your nervous system during challenging situations.
- **Prioritize self-care:** Make sure to practice self-care that nourishes your mind and body, which helps support a resilient nervous system.
- **Set boundaries:** Establish and maintain healthy boundaries in your relationships and daily life. Learn to say no when necessary and prioritize your needs to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

- **Go to therapy:** Seek professional support from a therapist who specializes in trauma or stress management. Therapy can provide valuable tools and strategies to process difficult emotions, heal past wounds, and expand your window of tolerance.
- **Map your nervous system:** You can explore nervous system mapping on your own or with the guidance of a therapist or coach. This process involves identifying and tracking your nervous system states, helping you gain a deeper understanding of your current state and enabling better self-regulation.
- **Prioritize gut health:** Nourishing your gut through a balanced diet, probiotics, and mindful eating practices can support a healthier nervous system and contribute to a wider window of tolerance. (See Support Your Gut Health in Chapter 2 for more information.)
- **Increase vagal tone:** Engage in practices that increase vagal tone (see Stimulate Your Vagus Nerve for Stress Relief in Chapter 2). Stimulation of the vagus nerve can reduce stress.
- **Get biofeedback:** Enhance self-regulation skills and expand your capacity to tolerate challenging emotions and situations through biofeedback training. Biofeedback involves gaining awareness of your physiological responses, such as heart rate, skin temperature, and muscle tension, and learning techniques to influence these responses. To get started with biofeedback, you can seek out qualified practitioners or use home biofeedback devices and apps that are designed to help you develop these skills.

Expanding your window of tolerance is a gradual process that requires patience and persistence, but it's worth the effort. As you expand your window of tolerance, you'll find yourself better equipped to navigate life's challenges with greater ease.